DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 361 341 TM 020 195

AUTHOR Kelly, Deirdre M.
TITLE Secondary Power Source: High School Students as Participatory Researchers.
PUB DATE Apr 93
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Atlanta, GA, April 12-16, 1993).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; Democracy; Dropout Prevention; *Educational Researchers; Feminism; Group Dynamics; High Schools; *High School Students; *Nontraditional Education; *Participatory Research; *Power Structure; Racial Differences; Research Problems; Secondary School Teachers; Sex Differences; Social Class; *Student Participation

ABSTRACT

Conditions that foster and hinder participatory research are examined, using examples from one such research project aimed at dropout reduction undertaken with students in a "last chance" high school. The 13 student researchers sometimes used racial, gender, and social class differences to gain power and display undemocratic behavior within the group. Dilemmas arose as small-scale actions were implemented that seemed to threaten the power and authority of teachers and administrators both within the alternative school and the traditional high schools that fed into it. The limits to extending democracy to students through research are identified, drawing on recent theoretical work on feminist pedagogy and participatory research. It is concluded that youths need to be taken seriously as knowers and potential agents of change, and that adults who want to work with adolescent researchers need to model democratic teaching and leadership. (Contains 33 references.) (Author/SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

DEIRDRE KELLY

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED 361 341

SECONDARY POWER SOURCE:

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS*

Deirdre M. Kelly

Department of Social and Educational Studies

University of British Columbia

Prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the

American Educational Research Association,

Atlanta, Georgia, April 15, 1993

*I would like to thank my student and teacher co-researchers as well as those who commented on the draft of this paper: Dave Beers, Jane Gaskell, Peter Seixas, and Randy Stoecker. Direct all correspondence to Deirdre Kelly, Department of Social and Educational Studies, Faculty of Education, University of British Columbia, 2125 Main Mall, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada.

TM 020195

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

SECONDARY POWER SOURCE:

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS

Conditions that foster and hinder participatory research are examined, using examples from one such research project aimed at dropout reduction undertaken with students in a "last chance" high school. Student researchers sometimes used racial, gender, and social class differences to gain power and display undemocratic behavior within the group. Dilemmas arose as small-scale actions were implemented that seemed to threaten the power and authority of teachers and administrators both within the alternative school and the traditional high schools that fed into it. The limits to extending democracy to students through research are identified, drawing upon recent theoretical work on feminist pedagogy and participatory research. I conclude that youths need to be taken seriously as knowers and potential agents of change and that adults who want to work with adolescent researchers need to model democratic teaching and leadership.

SECONDARY POWER SOURCE:

HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AS PARTICIPATORY RESEARCHERS

Feminists have gleaned important insights from postmodern theories, in particular using deconstruction as an analytical tool to delegitimate ideological bias. Poststructuralist feminists--among others--have insisted that no one form of oppression is more basic or more important than others and that individuals are simultaneously privileged and oppressed in many ways. With other critical scholars, they have argued that such common dualisms as researcher-researched and teacher-student have masked unequal relationships, and some have proposed to reconstruct them. In doing so, however, socialist feminists, in particular, have insisted on materialist analyses of the structural and institutional bases of exploitation. They have examined how everyday situations are arranged to foster or suppress dominance and are located within larger social, economic, and political relations (Griffith and Smith, 1991). In this paper I will argue that a participatory action research methodology is flexible enough to accommodate both insights; it encourages researchers to conceive of those traditionally seen as the objects of study as co-researchers instead, and it insists on linking individual problems to social structures. I will explore the problems and possibilities of attempting to break out of the researcher-researched dualism in the unlikely realm of the high school, where students--potential co-researchers--are still considered children without adult citizenship rights.

Charged with preparing young people to participate in a democracy, schools too often operate in ways that undermine this aim. A continuum of institutional schooling practices--a disparaging remark, placement in a remedial class or the "slow group," repeated failure, suspension, expulsion--selectively discourages, stigmatizes, and excludes students. Both inside and outside of schools, societal inequalities based on class, race, and gender place further limits on "actually existing democracy" (Fraser 1990).

What are the prospects for expanding democracy within schools so that students play a more direct role in shaping the form and content of their own

education as well as the nature of the community in which this learning takes place? In pursuing this question, I draw on my efforts to involve students attending a public continuation high school in a participatory research project aimed at dropout reduction. The students in such "last chance" schools are among those most preconditioned to exclusion from the public sphere, and so the search for a way to expose them to democratic practices takes on all the more relevance.

The paper describes how unequal power relations affected the research process in two distinct, nested contexts. Within the research group, I show how differences among student researchers were sometimes used to gain power and display such undemocratic behavior as racism and sexism. In the wider field of action, I analyze the dilemmas that arose as we tried to implement small-scale actions that seemed to threaten the authority of teachers and administrators both within the alternative school and the conventional schools that fed into it. Finally, I identify the limits to extending democracy to students through participatory research, concluding that adults who want to work with adolescent researchers need to model democratic teaching and leadership.

SEARCHING FOR AN EMPOWERING METHODOLOGY: A SOCIOLOGY *FOR* "DROPOUTS"?

The research on which this paper is based began with an interest in school practices such as tracking, academic failure, and in-grade retention that marginalize students. I developed a critique of the extensive literature on school dropouts that in many ways parallels feminist criticisms of mainstream social science and its treatment of women (Westkott 1979). First, the experience of "dropouts" has often been distorted and misinterpreted (Kelly 1992). For example, the very term dropout implies that students exercise a clear choice to leave school without graduating, and yet a fair number of students are pushed out or simply fade out (Fine 1991; Kelly 1993). As high school graduation has become the standard route to employment even for

manual laborers, it seems almost natural to portray dropouts as deviant, and yet the students who eventually leave early seem to be quite similar to non-college bound graduates; both groups, according to at least one national study, are generally alienated from the institution of high school and its adults (Wehlage and Rutter 1986).

Second, the methods used to study dropouts, commonly the large-scale survey, make dropouts the objects of research; rarely do they get an opportunity to have their voices heard, let alone shape research questions and approaches. Third, the purpose of research has not always aimed at improving dropouts' situations. In fact, research that seeks to distinguish dropouts from stayins--rather than, say, explore how schools and political and economic conditions help to create dropouts--has inadvertently fueled policies that blame the victim (by, for example, taking away their drivers' licenses and family welfare benefits). The popularity of studying "the dropout problem" seems to be tied more to economic anxieties than measurable increases in the trend--indeed, historical data suggest a steady decline in high school dropout rates since the turn of this century, although high inner city and Latino dropout rates show no evidence of decline (U.S. Dept. of Education 1992). In short, much as Dorothy Smith has argued for a sociology <u>for</u> women,[1] I concluded that a sociology <u>for</u> marginalized youths was much in order.

Beginning from the perspective of youths as knowers requires a methodology that encourages reducing the hierarchy between researchers and researched as well as taking their problems as a starting point for reflective action. Two related, but distinct traditions--action research and participatory research--incorporate these values and offer methods suited to a sociology for marginalized youths. What appears to distinguish both traditions from conventional social science research is the assumption that

---

[1]By a sociology <u>for</u> women rather than <u>of</u> women, Smith means "a sociology which will analyze and account for women's position in society and is capable of examining social structure from the perspective of women as subjects [knowers]" (Smith 1991 [1975], 253).

simply to know is not enough; one must act on what one knows, and in the process of acting and reflecting, one adds to and modifies existing knowledge, and so on. Tripp (1990, 159) has summarized the ongoing action research cycle as involving "four basic moments: planning, acting, fact-finding, analysis."

Brown and Tandon (1983) distinguish action research from participatory research in ways that become important in understanding the difficulties of trying to involve young people as researchers. Briefly, they argue that action research rests on a consensus model of society that favors reform as a change strategy, whereas participatory research assumes a conflict theory of society, holding that in situations of extreme inequality, changing social structures will be necessary to make the social world more egalitarian and just.[2]

Neither tradition appears to have taken children or adolescents seriously as co-researchers, particularly in educational settings. Fairly accepted in the field of education for many years, action research recently has grown into what some have called the teacher-as-researcher movement (e.g. Lytle and Cochran-Smith 1990). Because the action research model encourages teachers to analyze their own classroom practices, students frequently become the primary objects of, rather than allies in, research.

One might expect the participatory research tradition, which places more emphasis on power inequalities, to have generated studies that include youths as co-researchers, but these also appear to be rare, perhaps partly because of participatory research's intellectual history. Participatory research is usually traced to Paulo Freire's conscientization methodology and adult literacy campaigns. Following in Freire's path, participatory research projects have been done mainly with adults, largely in Third World countries.

---

[2]Others (e.g. Tripp 1990)--following Habermas's distinction between technical, practical, and emancipatory human interests--talk about action research being a family of activities that takes one of three different forms. In this schema, what Brown and Tandon call participatory research would be called emancipatory, socially critical, or participatory action research.

But another, more important explanation for the absence of young people in both traditions of research seems to be that they are thought to lack full capacities for consent and speech. As social, political, and economic life is currently structured, non-adults certainly do not participate on a par with adults in dialogue. In school settings, liberal (consensus) and radical (conflict) theorists of democracy both highlight the tension between respecting the autonomy of teachers and providing students with opportunities to participate in making decisions that affect their lives in school. To cede equal control to students over the conditions of their education would deny the importance of teachers' judgments. Yet "[i]nsofar as professional autonomy teaches deference to authority, it teaches a lesson in conflict with the conditions of democratic deliberation" (Gutmann 1987, 88).

Adult researchers face a similar dilemma in attempting to give school-age youths power to inquire into the circumstances of their own schooling and to act to improve these conditions. Nevertheless, working within the participatory research tradition, I will argue that adolescents can fruitfully be made co-researchers. That is, they can be involved in identifying a research problem, collecting evidence, analyzing and interpreting findings, and formulating plans for action based on those findings.

The participatory research model needs to be modified, however, given that young people are--on average and often by their own admission--less mature emotionally and intellectually than adult researchers. In allying with young co-researchers, the adult researcher needs to maintain a distinct role. Otherwise, the process risks reducing simply "to a dialogue between insider and outsider aimed at mutual self-understanding" (Burawoy 1991, 3). A sociology for marginalized youths needs to be capable of investigating "how the everyday, the personal, the level of feeling are embedded in larger social, economic and political relations" (Griffith and Smith 1991, 82-83). Thus, participatory researchers need to steer a careful course, away from the hierarchical and potentially exploitative relationship between researchers and those they research without resorting to a false denial of researchers'

inescapable authority and the responsibilities it carries.

Researchers, like teachers, learn specialized methods and accumulate a body of knowledge in the practice of their craft. Their expertise is one source of their authority. Yet this authority should be exercised humbly and in full awareness of other potential forms of power held by researchers by virtue of their class, race, gender, and so on. Negotiating an issue for action research starts adult researchers and students on a search for commonality and an exploration of differences. Although adult researchers should not simply cede their authority to students, they can and should, through their leadership, create moments where their authority is shared with students by temporarily placing young people in teaching and research roles and then reflecting with them on what has been learned.

In reflecting on their authority, adult researchers need to remind themselves of the reasons for involving students in participatory research. First, it is important for youths to have a sense of power, to feel that their existing interests are being built upon or stretched and then acted on. Second, students stand to learn a lot about personal politics and how knowledge is produced and used, apart from the specific issue selected for participatory research. Third, by incorporating students' perspectives on issues, policy-makers stand to gain a more nuanced understanding. "In a democracy," as Gaskell has argued (1988, 405), "all sides of an issue deserve a hearing, and research can help many groups articulate and clarify their concerns." Finally, involving students in participatory research takes seriously Dewey's idea of the public school as "a miniature community." "The only way to prepare for social life is to engage in social life" (Dewey, quoted in Menand 1992, 54).

The effort to claim democracy and community through participatory research seems most urgent in remedial and disciplinary classrooms. Research has shown that the least democratic teaching methods are often used in remedial and lower tracks (Metz 1978; Oakes 1985). These students often develop a negative attitude toward schooling. Many of the alternative or

magnet programs that aim to increase democracy tend to serve the sons and daughters of the already privileged, students who may be predisposed to participation (Gutmann 1987, 88; Gray and Chanoff 1986). The bigger challenge lies in addressing students who are most likely to become disenfranchised under our current form of government.

THE MECHANICS OF COLLABORATION

I had the opportunity to take up this challenge beginning in the spring of 1988. A professor and I (a graduate student at this time) had received a grant through our "university-schools collaboration" program to work with two school districts on the issue of dropouts. Administrators in both districts suggested I work with teachers at the continuation high schools to deepen my understanding of the dropout problem as it manifested itself locally. Continuation schools make up California's oldest and largest dropout prevention and recovery program. "Beacon,"[3] the continuation school I focus on in this paper, enrolled an average of 130 students, mostly working-class; roughly 55 percent were white, 35 percent were Latino, predominantly of Mexican origin, and 10 percent were Filipino-, Native-, and African-American.

Because we wanted to understand why students were disengaging from school, I argued that we should be collaborating with students as well as teachers. After all, most continuation students had left school before, and others were on the verge of doing so. In thinking about how to involve students, I had in mind a participatory research model. I expected that students would define the dropout problem differently than either the teachers or administrators and further that their definitions and proposals for change might conflict with--and be resisted by--those with greater institutional power and authority. Like an action researcher, however, I had gained access to students through the consent of organizational authorities, who retained the power to circumscribe or veto our activities. As the research progressed,

---

[3]Beacon and all other names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

it became clear that even the teachers most sympathetic to student involvement conceived of students not as co-researchers but as advisers; this revealed their commitment to the consensus assumptions of the action research model.

Beacon's teachers were more open to experimentation than most in conventional schools, as evidenced by their willingness to negotiate classroom norms with students. Most met my request to involve students in the research project with enthusiasm. Teachers recruited thirteen volunteers, with whom I met alone for eight two-hour group discussions, all audiotaped; they received English and social studies credit for the time they spent with me. These students agreed to serve as an "advisory group," our unofficial title for the rest of the year, given to us by the teachers. Although I had set the broad agenda--"dropout reduction"--before officially involving students, at our first full meeting, I began by throwing the question back to the group. Was dropping out a problem? If so, why, and for whom? These questions elicited stories of getting "kicked out" for fighting with peers, teachers, and administrators. Others had been "locked out" for being tardy or suspended for being absent. Kris complained, "Schools separate people; they put people in different categories. When you mess up, they put you in with the trash." Judging by their stories, the district's comprehensive schools had disengaged from students just as much as students had disengaged from schools. Students also spent a lot of time comparing the continuation and comprehensive high schools. Although Beacon stigmatized them as dropouts and losers, students generally found its small size and other distinctive features less alienating.

A few meetings into the project, I raised the issue of generalizability with the advisory group. I had learned a lot from them about how they had ended up at Beacon, but were their stories similar to those of their classmates? They were unsure and expressed enthusiasm for helping me to find out. At this point, I discussed potential research methods: participant observation, interviewing (one-on-one or in groups), and questionnaires. Participant observation seemed to position them as "narcs" and was rejected. Their classmates would not take questionnaires seriously, they argued, because

the district already asked students annually to evaluate school staff performance, and, as Pete put it, "They never change any of those things." Students liked the idea of interviewing, perhaps because it seemed most natural, like a conversation. Although some wanted group interviews, the majority felt one-on-one interviews would provide a safer atmosphere for students to express their views.

For efficiency's sake, I made the case for the group constructing a semi-structured interview schedule. When I gave them examples based on what I had heard them say about school, they linked the method to public opinion polls often cited in the news. Students began to realize the power of producing knowledge and seemed genuinely excited by the prospect that adults might find their data convincing. Based on concerns identified in past meetings, I devised some open-ended questions that I thought would allow interviewees to explain how they felt about school and why. I then encouraged the advisory group to cut out questions they deemed inappropriate, reword others, and add to the list. For example, students wanted to add a question that would elicit their classmates' views on such issues as whether teachers and administrators misused their power.

The group especially wanted to see if there was support for four policy initiatives they thought up and wished to see implemented: obtaining personal passes directly from counselors to leave campus; a program for pregnant and parenting teens; peer counseling; and the opportunity for continuation students to promote Beacon as a positive alternative at comprehensive school assemblies. After the interview schedule was complete, I trained the advisory group with the help of a video camera to do interviewing. In all, the students interviewed a random sample of 36 of their peers. An English teacher suggested that students write an article for the student newspaper reporting our results, which they did.

Student co-researchers helped me analyze preliminary findings. For example, some girls were puzzled and disturbed that a significant minority of boys (41 percent) were opposed or neutral toward establishing a program for

pregnant and parenting students at Beacon. The survey no doubt underestimated the level of opposition. For one, as David observed, students who opposed the policy felt they had "to justify it" and maybe did not want to give "the true reason." For another, Annie revealed that she had given a few resistant interviewees the hard sell. I asked the boys in the advisory group if they could explain the male resistance, and they suggested: the high cost of providing child care; the disruption of having babies in and around classes; the risk of miscarriage if pregnant girls got jostled at school; and boys' embarrassment at having got their girlfriends pregnant, made "more visible because they're actually bringing it to school where all their friends and everybody is." The girls responded angrily, especially to the last explanation. Exclaimed Peggy, "You guys have been watching daddy too much! Shit!" "What are they going to do [instead]," asked Annie, "keep it locked away in a closet?" I cautioned against confusing the boys' attempts to understand the survey finding with their own opinions, which prompted David to say, "they should let pregnant women stay in school," and Kyle to note that "they should be allowed to stay in classes where all their friends are." Joe, John, and Pete remained silent.

The Beacon survey revealed that the transition from junior to senior high had been particularly difficult. Acting on this, a number of students, teachers, administrators, and I developed a group called Student-to-Student. Thirteen students were trained as peer counselors and spent time at two junior high schools talking to small groups of students about their own schooling experiences and answering questions.

In keeping with the participatory research model, I allied myself with the least powerful group--the students--and sought to have their voices heard. But, as I will show in the next two sections, this effort produced dilemmas both within the research group as students deliberated on what we might do and outside the group as students conceived action plans and tried to help implement them.

USING DIFFERENCES TO GAIN POWER

Within the advisory group, it had been my idealistic--and, as it turned out, naive--hope that the differences among students would not be converted into hierarchies. To the extent possible, I wanted to serve as an unobtrusive facilitator in a participatory democracy where each student had an equal voice and expertise. Although nobody was completely silenced and a few hierarchies got softened, internal power plays were all too in evidence and did influence the group's ultimate research agenda.

The participatory research projects that had inspired me to enlist students as co-researchers had failed to sensitize me adequately to the ways that inequalities based on class, gender, and race can limit achieving consensus within the research group itself. Conceiving of the Beacon students as an oppressed group with common experiences and interests, for example, led me to anticipate conflict with more powerful outside groups but not among the "oppressed" themselves. Indeed, in their discussion of participatory research, Brown and Tandon encourage researchers in this tradition to see that "consensus assumptions . . . fit relations between participatory researchers and their clients" (1983, 292). Yet finding consensus assumptions among the advisory group members proved to be more problematic than this.

White students, subtly and not so subtly, kept the issue of institutional racism from explicitly being taken up and acted on. They did this by tapping into ethnic stereotypes as well as the prevailing discourse of liberal individualism. Ethnic minority students spoke about prejudice and racism, but their voices were subordinated in the majority-white Beacon context.

I got a hint of the racial tensions at the start of the project when I first met students in groups of three. At an introductory meeting with Joe, John (both Mexican-Americans), and Peggy (white), Joe explained to us why his sister had dropped out, concluding, "I think the majority of the reasons people leave school is because they've had enough." His comment prompted the following exchange:

John: It's a long time to be in school, . . .

Joe: It's monotonous. Myself, I worked--

John: . . . every day having to get up--

Peggy: Lazy fucks! God!

Joe: What?

Peggy [in a mocking tone]: "Gotta get up in the morning."

Peggy's comment at once invoked the negative stereotype of "lazy" Mexicans and allowed her to regain control of the conversation. Ironically, she cut Joe off from explaining that he worked forty hours per week as a shop clerk. And later John cited hearing negative stereotypes about Latinos as a prime reason he felt so school-weary.

Once the advisory group had taken full form, David, a Filipino-American, initiated a discussion of racial tension by linking ethnic separation at school to his personal experience of police harassment and racist hiring practices. The most vocal white students responded defensively. "There's a difference between a white guy and a rich white guy. There's white supremacy," explained Peggy, to general agreement. The white students thus distanced themselves from blame by distinguishing between themselves and "rich whites" or "white supremacists."

John successfully sought confirmation from two white students that some students and school adults were prejudiced against "Mexicans." But the other white students insisted, for example, on linking administrator bias to "money" (social class), "attitude" and dress, religion, and gender. All of these, in turn, were said to be examples of how people get judged unfairly based on "looks," of which ethnicity was only one element. In what I interpreted as a peacemaking gesture, Joe summarized: "It all depends on the individual. You can't judge someone simply by their race. If somebody asked me, 'Hey, what race are you?', I'm gonna say, 'I'm with the human race.'" What began as an examination of institutional racism thus ended with the liberal idea that everyone is really the same underneath it all. The ethnic minority students

never had the full opportunity to clarify or articulate their concerns, which, in turn, never appeared on the group's research agenda.

In sum, Beacon's context appears to have affected internal group dynamics, suppressing the issue of institutional racism.[4] In retrospect, I think the ethnic composition of the research group as well as my fear of imposing "outside" values and analyses on student co-researchers also contributed to this outcome. White students made up a majority on the advisory. The fact that as a white person and convener of the group I failed to share my own views on racism no doubt contributed to the exclusion of this issue from our research and action agenda. In contrast, my being a woman and the fact that girls outnumbered boys in the group may have emboldened the girls to contribute more aggressively to the research agenda. Although, again, I sought to elicit student views rather than expound on my own, as students got to know me, they no doubt inferred I was a feminist upon learning, for example, that I had kept my maiden name.

This may help to explain, then, how the girls came to contest sexism among the boys and to argue that their concerns should be addressed by the entire group. Also, one of the introductory meetings with me had been all female, and Kris, Jean, and Sandra freely discussed the importance of boyfriends in pulling girls out of school, dating abuse, family problems, and the difficult transition to womanhood. In retrospect, this all-female studying of a common moment of crisis--dropping out--served a consciousness

---

[4]The experience was different at "La Fuente"--a larger, more traditional continuation school with a majority of non-white teachers and students--where I carried out another participatory research project with students. There I found more institutional openness to fostering an anti-racist agenda. The school already sponsored ethnic pride events, encouraged a Black Student Union, and suspended students for racial slurs. When students working with me on the issue of fighting polled their classmates, 12 percent of the 111 respondents spontaneously mentioned racism as a common reason for fighting, a finding that led the student council to propose a racially sensitive peer mediation program.

raising function. Sandra told us that being battered by an ex-boyfriend led her to drop out, which prompted Kris and Jean to share stories about male violence, the sexual double standard, and female resistance.

At a subsequent meeting of the entire advisory group, Sandra argued, and the other girls agreed, that boyfriend/girlfriend issues deserved an explicit place on our research agenda. The boys were indifferent initially but eventually agreed to add the question, "When you cut school, do you see your boyfriend or girlfriend?" Girls also argued that Beacon needed a program for pregnant and parenting students, fathers as well as mothers.

Relative to the ethnic minority students, the girls felt safe enough to challenge stereotypes and voice their concerns. But the issues that could not easily be posed as gender-neutral did not find their way onto the interview schedule. On two occasions, for example, girls discussed the problem of male teachers and administrators sexually harassing female students. Sandra's story of being assaulted by her boyfriend was not unique, yet even when she referred to the problem as "couple abuse," nobody else took up the issue. Thus, the group, including its most vocal girls, stopped short of asking questions that might have led to an exploration of why women are disproportionately the targets of male violence.

In short, the story of this project is as interesting for what did not get asked, researched, and proposed for action as for what did. I have tried to show the role that internal group dynamics played in suppressing certain interests and questions while legitimizing others.

ACTION AND REACTION

Despite the power plays and compromises I have identified, students at Beacon accomplished no small feat. They honed a research problem, reconceptualizing the dropout phenomenon to include conventional schools' pushout practices. They learned what goes into producing a certain type of knowledge, and by surveying their classmates, they mobilized support for four

potential policy reforms. When the students' ideas for action were considered by school adults, they learned more about the uses of knowledge in the context of unequal power relations. I learned more about the role of the researcher as activist and expert.

It was at this stage--deciding which action plan to implement--that I felt most constrained. Early on, my university credentials and researcher status had helped me persuade the continuation school staff to give students a bigger role in framing the research problem. But when it came time to implement what students had suggested--to act in a wider arena with them--I found I had less legitimacy with school and district officials. In addition, I wanted to maintain good rapport with the school district gatekeepers in order to do my ethnographic research (Kelly 1993); I could not afford to be seen as a rabble-rouser.[5]

The students with whom I worked generally wanted to see the high school itself adapt to fit their attitudes and needs. But the project we worked on together, shaped by what those with more power would allow us to do, aimed at encouraging the students themselves to change. None of the "collaboration" was geared to allowing the high school students to have a direct impact on changing the institution. Instead, with teachers and administrators now in the lead, individual "solutions" were applied to largely structural problems; this section describes the contradictions that arose as a result.

Three-quarters of the students surveyed favored sending Beacon students to comprehensive high school assemblies to inform other students about what the alternative school had to offer. In proposing this action, the advisory

---

[5]My fear was realized at La Fuente, the other research site. Although a majority of students had supported a peer mediation proposal, administrators worried that it would hamper their ability to maintain order, because peer mediation was meant to provide students with an alternative to suspension for fighting. When I volunteered to implement mediation, the principal told me a teacher would explore it. At the end of my fieldwork, nothing had come of the idea.

group had two motives. One was to reduce the stigma attached to the continuation program by letting people know what Beacon was "really like, cuz then," explained Pete, "we could get rid of all these rumors." Second, they wanted to play up Beacon's appealing organizational features, which allowed it to serve as a safety net for casualties of the mainstream schools. But from the start, advisory group members were justifiably skeptical that they would be given the chance because, as John put it, administrators "don't want people to think that you can succeed at Beacon." Students felt that the district-wide dropout rate would decline if all young people received the personalized attention they now did, absent the stigma. Yet students knew, too, that, in Kyle's words, "they don't have the capacity right now" to "tailor regular high schools so teachers will listen more."

The one-quarter of Beacon students surveyed who opposed the idea of a positive publicity campaign reasoned that such action could not overcome the stigma attached to Beacon and its students: "Other schools don't care--they think we're dropouts." When we later tried to understand this minority viewpoint, advisory group members began to grapple with the contradictions of attending a stigmatized safety net. First, they remarked on how, in interviewing their classmates, they had often referred to the comprehensive high schools as "regular" or "normal," thus unwittingly implying that Beacon was inferior. Second, they compared stories about how they transferred to Beacon and discovered that administrators had given lowest priority on the waiting list to students who had volunteered to attend Beacon, while those considered the biggest troublemakers--by their own admission--were placed "at the top of the list." Beacon billed itself as a "school of choice" because all transfers were technically voluntary, yet the district used its alternative school as a safety valve.

It came as no surprise, then, that administrators never took up the idea of having Beacon students publicizing their school as a positive alternative. Administrators and teachers were most receptive to the idea of training Beacon students to be peer counselors, who could talk to junior high students about

the difficult transition to high school. The idea was less threatening. Rather than urging students their own age to consider opting out of the main schooling system, Beacon peer counselors--positioned as models of what not to do--would be telling younger students how to avoid getting off track in school. In a memo Beacon's principal explained the project's purpose to junior high principals as "encouraging at-risk students to remain in the comprehensive setting."

By the time Beacon's staff had endorsed the peer counseling idea, a new school year had begun, and all but one of the original student advisers had either graduated, dropped out, been pushed out, or were focused on meeting graduation requirements. David, together with teacher-counselor Ms. Foster, recruited a dozen new students. I agreed to help Ms. Foster train what became known as the Student-to-Student (STS) group. From the start, tensions existed over what sort of role models these peer counselors would be and for whom.

Students saw their role as connecting with younger people most like themselves. They wanted to be able to use slang and "cuss" words when addressing the junior high students. In essence, they felt this would demonstrate that they were not "goody-two-shoes" but still realized the importance of getting a good education. In contrast, Ms. Foster and her colleagues were concerned that the continuation students provide good role models. They felt swearing wasn't appropriate school behavior under any circumstances. Teachers, according to David, were unrealistic; they expected young people to come from "perfect families like in 'The Cosby Show,'" whereas for him "Roseanne" and its portrayal of working-class family life was far more accurate.

Many continuation students had themselves been caught up in power struggles with school authorities. What would they advise their younger peers to do in similar circumstances? During a role play on how to avoid conflict with teachers over tardiness, continuation students saw little difference between "brownnosing" and diplomacy. When Ms. Foster suggested that students try to change themselves and the way they looked at the situation, Tom

interpreted this to mean, "I flex to please the teacher." He rejected her idea that a "win-win" scenario was possible.

Tom's experience of the teacher-student relationship as a zero-sum game was common among continuation students. Tanya, for example, told me, "I can't handle having to sit in this big classroom and listen to the teacher lecture, having to deal with those teachers that are power hungry. Some of them just jump at the chance to punish kids." It was ironic then, if understandable, that early on STS participants feared what would happen when they were left alone with a group of junior high students, and these fears led them to favor a lecture format and an authoritarian approach to discipline. A number of the boys wanted to use what they called a "Scared Straight" approach. In the movie by that name, street-wise ex-cons talk tough to teenagers about what lies ahead for them if they continue to use and deal drugs.

Students who had bridled under the exercise of adult restraint now seemed intent on replicating the very practices they had rebelled against. Ms. Foster urged STS members to "personalize," or to open up emotionally with the younger students by discussing their own junior high experiences. The results once out in the junior high schools were mixed. Many lectured students for at least part of the time and occasionally resorted to repeating slogans like "Say no to drugs."

The STS format seemed to encourage this communication style. When junior high students complained of real problems, the Beacon students--lacking formal authority or mechanisms for group action--could only urge individual responses, which they themselves had not followed. Dennis, for example, listened to a group of eighth grade Latinos complain about their vice principal, a man familiar to Dennis from his own days at Hart Junior High. "He gives us Mexicans a hard time, man," said one boy; his friends chimed in with examples. Dennis, a Mexican-American, responded, "That's cuz he is a white boy, man. There might be some prejudiced people around here, but you gotta chill, you can't let that stop you from getting your diploma." As an observer, I said nothing, yet Dennis' reaction surprised me. I had recently

interviewed him at length about his own school experiences, and institutional racism had been a prominent theme. In the year that I had known Dennis, I had often seen him verbally and physically confront people he thought were racially prejudiced, and he had described to me a critical analysis of what he saw as the school's biased curriculum.

Like institutional racism, economic dilemmas--overeducation, labor market segmentation, structural unemployment--were not subject to individual "solution." Nevertheless, teachers and parents often counsel students to stay in school in order to obtain good jobs. Beacon students were skeptical of this promise at times. Some of the occupations to which they aspired, such as carpentry or hairdressing, did not seem logically to require a high school diploma. This contradiction came to the fore during a preparatory role play in which Scott, a "teacher," tried to convince Doug, an "eighth grader," that he needed a diploma in order to become a carpenter:

> Scott: These days, there's a lot of things you need for drafting, for instance, you need math skills. You need to know how to use the ruler. You guys think that's gay, but math is important whether you realize that or not.
>
> Doug: So you're saying if I pass 20 units of math, that's all I need [and] then I can drop out?
>
> Scott: No, what I'm sayin' is, uh, hmmm. You got a good point there!

Other students pointed out that a diploma would not guarantee them a job, especially without a college education. For those who felt they could not handle college, academically or financially, high school became a holding pen. Kris explained that school authorities did not mind her skipping classes as long as she stayed at home. "They just don't want you in the streets."

Yet these insights, which influenced the STS members' own precarious relationships to school, went unexplored with junior high students. Younger students were exhorted to get a high school diploma. "If you don't have one," explained Renee, "they're not going to hire you--even if you want to work for McDonalds or be a janitor." If you drop out, Alfredo told another group,

"you'll be living in a little shack, cuz you won't be able to support a family on minimum wage jobs." When this elicited no response, he added, "We're trying to help you guys, so you won't turn out like us."

Don't "turn out like us" (Alfredo), "don't follow in my footsteps" (Maria), "don't end up like us" (Renee). Given that STS members attended a stigmatized place--"a dropout school"--it was difficult for them to portray themselves as turnaround success stories, models of individual advancement ("I made it--so can you"). Instead, they got positioned as models of what not to do. Yet this meant they tended to urge their younger counterparts to adjust themselves to an institution that many still found profoundly alienating. STS members had identified institutional barriers contributing to dropout, but as unequal partners in the collaboration, they did not have enough power to initiate change at that level.

By the following year (1989-90), most of the STS members had left Beacon, as had I. The few remaining members told Ms. Foster they felt hypocritical urging younger students to "hang with" the regular high school. They also felt uncomfortable because some junior high students had told them they wanted to go to Beacon, ignorant of how attending a continuation school would mark them as "outcasts." Ms. Foster, citing logistical and time constraints, also decided to quit, and no other teachers elected to continue the participatory research cycle.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Several dilemmas arise when high school students become participatory researchers, all of which involve the authority of adult researchers and call upon those researchers to develop and make use of democratic teaching and leadership qualities. I will discuss these dilemmas, drawing upon recent theoretical work on feminist pedagogy and participatory research.

Authority and the Dilemma of Silencing

Conventional research that positions the researcher as sole authority over the research has meant that the concerns of the researched often go unspoken and unexplored; their interests may get distorted and misrepresented. One response is to try to dismantle the researcher-researched authority relations. In a parallel fashion, some feminist teachers--usually at the university level--have advocated and tried to implement participatory democracy in their classrooms. But, as feminist and other critical theorists have increasingly recognized, researchers and teachers can never stop being authorities or having authority. Located within institutions that bestow formal power on them, university-based researchers typically initiate collaborative projects; they have greater access to resources, more time for reflection, and greater claims to special knowledge. Similarly, teachers--usually located within competitive, hierarchical, and individualistic institutions--have the power and responsibility to evaluate and discipline students and select curriculum (Briskin 1990, 10; Weiler 1991, 460).

No classroom or research setting is impermeable to the unequal power relations of the wider world. These inequalities can become resources which people use to silence students as well as undermine the authority of teachers (Ng 1991) and researchers. Gardner, Dean, and McKaig (1989), for example, show how, despite democratic intentions, superordinate groups used differences--based on sexual orientation, social class, and theoretical knowledge--to gain power over and silence others in several women's studies classrooms. But, they argue, authority can be a source of empowerment; in her professor role, Gardner took the lead in restructuring the classroom interactions that many of her students felt had become oppressive. Gardner describes this, following Culley, as an instance of using "authority with" rather than "authority over" students.

Similarly, Briskin argues feminist teachers need to teach leadership and practice anti-sexism, anti-racism, and anti-classism. "To teach leadership is

not only to name, negotiate, and try to change the power relations of the classroom. It is to focus students' attention on their own agency outside the classroom" (Briskin 1990, 11-12). I would advocate this strategy when involving students in participatory research. In my own first effort, I tried to implement a form of democracy that naively assumed an abstract equality among all students. In hindsight, I should have taken a more active role when tensions based on ethnic and gender differences arose; these tensions should have been discussed, analyzed, and perhaps placed on the action research agenda. Claims on the part of some white students to be free of ethnic prejudice, for example, could have been challenged indirectly by a discussion of institutional versus personal racism. I would also recommend experimenting with the structure of the full advisory group. The accidental and one-time formation of an all-female group early in the project provided a forum that later seemed to aid the girls in clarifying and voicing gender-relevant concerns in the full advisory group with boys present.

Power was not just used to deny or ignore differences; genuine attempts at coalition building and dialogue across differences also occurred within the advisory group. Although techniques for improving communication alone cannot redress power imbalances, a few students displayed skills that encouraged dialogue, some of which could be identified and modeled. Regan (1990, 567) summarizes a few of these skills: "paraphrasing what a speaker said to create the experience of being heard, throwing questions back to the group, pointedly soliciting opinions from the quiet ones, allowing silences to create the expectation that others would speak . . ." Working with groups of adolescents who may pride themselves on their defiance and anti-school attitude presents an added challenge. Those who have experienced the competitive academic curriculum as oppressive and feel scholastically inadequate will occasionally try to squelch their friends' intellectual curiosity. For example, Peggy was having fun thinking up possible interview questions, and her friend Annie silenced her with an exasperated, "Jesus, Peggy--book!" A starting technique that I found useful was asking a group member to record hurtful comments as

well as tactful ones spoken during a meeting; this process encouraged reflection as well as created a record that could have become the basis for a discussion of silencing.

Expertise and the Dilemma of Imposition

Participatory research, like good teaching, often begins with the experiences of participants. But adult researchers must guard against a simple validation of these experiences for the same reason that a number of feminist theorists have identified. The experiences of all relevant groups may not be represented among the researchers, and even if they were, their interests may get suppressed (cf. Briskin 1990, 10). Fuss recommends that teachers (and I would add, researchers) encourage students to "examine collectively the central role social and historical practices play in shaping and producing these narratives [of lived experience]" (1989, 118). Participatory research provides the rudiments of a methodology for just the sort of collective examination, evaluation, and reevaluation of personal experiences that Fuss recommends.

As part of this research cycle, adult researchers share their special knowledge or expertise with students, including how to gain more knowledge; they should, in short, exercise intellectual leadership. At the same time, they need to guard against imposing their views on the group. At least three responses for coping with the dilemma of imposition exist: problem posing, theoretical pluralism, and seeking out like-minded co-researchers.

Freire's problem-posing pedagogy encourages people to link individual experiences to social and political concerns. For example, students in the Beacon advisory group recognized that although the school district treated them like dropouts, a good number had actually been "kicked out." Other questions arose about the meaning and value of a high school diploma. In my own tentative use of problem-posing, I drew on my knowledge of dropout research and various theoretical frameworks in synthesizing students'

comments, experiences, and assumptions in order to re-present their questions as problems we might research. The aim was to encourage students to see themselves as potential theorists and agents of change.

As a further precaution against my simply setting the research agenda for students, I tried to emulate the theoretical pluralism that I had experienced in feminist studies classes and texts. For example, Jaggar and Rothenberg's Feminist Frameworks presents alternative accounts of women's position in society, ranging from conservative to socialist feminist to the critiques of women of color. "Teaching may . . . involve a complex interweaving of perspectives and values rather than the replacement of a simple dominant view with another, no matter how broadly and inclusively intentioned" (Maher 1987, 97).

A third response to the dilemma of imposition is to work with like-minded others on participatory research. Troyna and Foster discuss this possibility in light of collaborative research with teachers in the area of multicultural and anti-racist education. Given that university-based researchers may "not share the same political and ideological terrain" as school practitioners, Troyna and Foster suggest presenting teachers and administrators with "a statement of ethical and educational principles to which the researcher subscribes" in advance of the collaboration (1988, 297-8).

When working with young people, adult researchers must also claim the authority to guide students with respect to possible research questions. Not all ideas may be worth pursuing, but they can usually be converted into topics for participatory research. For example, over half of the Beacon advisory group described suffering at the hands of one apparently authoritarian vice principal of discipline, and one proposed organizing a recall effort. I suggested that this might seem like sour grapes, which then might undermine the advisory group's legitimacy, and identified the issue as partly one of governance and student participation in the making and review of school rules.

Although they may need guidance, students should retain the power to

negotiate and veto research questions, or else their status as co-researchers becomes empty. Further, the topic ultimately selected should provide opportunities for students to create or draw from their own knowledge base. Adult researchers need to take students' issues seriously, recognizing with Maxine Greene that "human beings are prone to take action in response to the sense of injustice or to the imagination's capacity to look at things as if they could be otherwise" (1993, 17). In school settings, for example, students often desire to change what are perceived to be bad educational practices; this represents a challenge to institutional power. Such topics are worth pursuing but carry potential risks; adult researchers, based on their more extensive experience, should take responsibility for helping students to think through the consequences and to imagine alternatives.

Power and the Dilemma of Change

Participatory researchers, like equity-minded teachers, must confront "the difficulty of using a 'power with' model in a 'power over' society" (Maher 1987, 98). The young people who acted collectively to conduct research and devise action plans represented a power source, but, by virtue of their age, they were secondary--auxiliary at best. Participatory researchers by definition are interested in social change, but once the process is carried outside the research group or classroom, they will surely meet resistance. One danger in seeking to implement action plans that are too ambitious or likely to be blocked by those who hold more power is that students may become pessimistic or cynical about the possibility of change.

Adult researchers, therefore, need to help students assess the success rates of alternate plans as well as to prepare them to cope emotionally and intellectually with conflict that is sure to arise in the course of the research cycle. To take a related example: public school teachers across the United States have developed environmental education classes that encourage students to investigate ecological issues in their own communities and to take

responsible action based on their findings. This appears to be provoking a backlash from business leaders and some parents, who charge these teachers with indoctrinating children. According to a Wall Street Journal report, "some business people worry that teaching such activism will prejudice young people against free enterprise and that they will grow up hostile to industry. And some parents complain that their grade-school children are becoming rude activists . . ." (Allen 1992, A5).

Adult researchers would benefit from examining how equity-minded teachers address social issues. Carrington and Troyna (1988) recommend approaching controversial issues holistically, helping students to identify the specific nature of racial, gender, and class inequalities, while at the same time connecting these with students' own experiences of inequality in an effort to create empathy. Fine (1991, 262) suggests constructing students' participation in social problems curricula around "small, pre-planned victories" in order to avoid perpetuating a "sense of hopelessness." Another strategy involves teachers collaborating with people and organizations in the community who can lend support and legitimacy to socially conscious curricular goals.

Participatory researchers challenge business as usual. In pressing for change, they remind themselves that certain features of institutional structures and practices--those that constrain as well as empower--are relatively enduring. As Mary Hawkesworth puts it:

> There is a modicum of permanence within the fluidity of the life-world: traditions, practices, relationships, institutions, and structures persist and can have profound consequences for individual life prospects, constraining opportunities for growth and development, resisting reconstitution, frustrating efforts toward direction and control (1988, 556).

In contrast, strands of postmodern theory that reduce the world to mere text and thus endorse relativism contribute to "a profound sense of resignation, a nihilist recognition that there is nothing to do because nothing can be done" (Hawkesworth, 1988, 557).

Against this position, I believe something can be done. Adult researchers can use their authority democratically, to learn from and with young co-researchers, to assist a relatively disempowered group in society to produce knowledge framed by its concerns. Along the way, they must focus continually on making the research and wider communities more democratic and on discerning the possibilities for change by testing the concrete limits to their actions.

REFERENCES

Allen, Frank Edward. 1992. "Seen and Heard: Schoolchildren Learn Ecology by Doing--To Alleged Polluters." Wall Street Journal, April 30, pp. A1, A5.

Briskin, Linda. 1990. Feminist Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning Liberation. Ottawa, Ontario: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Brown, L. David, and Rajesh Tandon. 1983. "Ideology and Political Economy in Inquiry: Action Research and Participatory Research." Journal of Applied Behavioral Science 19 (3): 277-294.

Burawoy, Michael. 1991. "Introduction." Pp. 1-7 in Ethnography Unbound, edited by Michael Burawoy, Alice Burton, Ann Arnett Ferguson, Kathryn J. Fox, Joshua Gamson, Nadine Gartrell, Leslie Hurst, Charles Kurzman, Leslie Salzinger, Josepha Schiffman, and Shiori Ui. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Carrington, Bruce, and Barry Troyna. 1988. "Combatting Racism." Pp. 205-22 in Children and Controversial Issues, edited by Bruce Carrington and Barry Troyna. London: Falmer Press.

Fine, Michelle. 1991. Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban High School. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Fraser, Nancy. 1990. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Social Text 25/26: 56-80.

Freire, Paulo. 1970. Pedagogy of the Oppressed. New York: Herder and Herder.

Fuss, Diana. 1989. Essentially Speaking. New York: Routledge.

Gardner, Saundra, Cynthia Dean, and Deo McKaig. 1989. "Responding to Differences in the Classroom: The Politics of Knowledge, Class, and Sexuality." Sociology of Education 62: 64-74.

Gaskell, Jane. 1988. "Policy Research and Politics." The Alberta Journal of Educational Research 34: 403-17.

Gray, Peter, and David Chanoff. 1986. "Democratic Schooling: What Happens to Young People Who Have Charge of Their Own Education?" American Journal of Education 94: 182-213.

Greene, Maxine. 1993. "The Passions of Pluralism: Multiculturalism and the Expanding Community." Educational Researcher 22: 13-18.

Griffith, Alison I., and Dorothy E. Smith. 1991. "Constructing Cultural Knowledge: Mothering as Discourse." Pp. 81-97 in Women and Education (2nd ed.), edited by Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren. Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises Limited.

Gutmann, Amy. 1987. Democratic Education. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hawkesworth, Mary E. 1989. "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth." Signs 14 (3): 533-557.

Jaggar, Alison M., and Paula S. Rothenberg, eds. 1984. Feminist Frameworks (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Kelly, Deirdre M. 1992. "Ten Myths about Dropouts." Perspectives in Education, Fall, pp. 67-72.

Kelly, Deirdre M. 1993. Last Chance High: How Girls and Boys Drop In and Out of Alternative Schools New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Lytle, Susan L., and Marilyn Cochran-Smith. 1990. "Learning from Teacher Research: A Working Typology." Teachers College Record 92 (1): 83-103.

Maher, Frances A. 1987. "Toward a Richer Theory of Feminist Pedagogy: A Comparison of 'Liberation' and 'Gender' Models for Teaching and Learning." Journal of Education 169: 91-100.

Menand, Louis. 1992. "The Real John Dewey." The New York Review, June 25, pp. 50-55.

Metz, Mary. 1978. Classrooms and Corridors: The Crisis of Authority in Desegregated Secondary Schools. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ng, Roxanna. 1991. "Teaching Against the Grain: Contradictions and Minority Teachers." Pp. 99-115 in Women and Education (2nd ed.), edited by Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren. Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises Limited.

Oakes, Jeannie. 1985. Keeping Track: How Schools Structure Inequality. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Regan, Helen B. 1990. "Not for Women Only: School Administrators as a Feminist Activity." Teachers College Record 91: 565-78.

Smith, Dorothy E. [1979] 1991. "An Analysis of Ideological Structures and How Women Are Excluded: Considerations for Academic Women." Pp. 233-56 in Women and Education (2nd ed.), edited by Jane Gaskell and Arlene McLaren. Calgary, Alberta: Detselig Enterprises Limited.

Tripp, David H. 1990. "Socially Critical Action Research." Theory Into Practice 29 (3): 158-166.

Troyna, Barry, and Peter Foster. 1988. "Conceptual and Ethical Dilemmas of Collaborative Research: Reflections on a Case Study." Educational Review 40: 289-300.

U.S. Dept. of Education. 1992. Issue Brief: Are Hispanic Dropout Rates Related to Migration?. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Wehlage, Gary G., and Robert A. Rutter. 1986. "Dropping Out: How Much Do Schools Contribute to the Problem?" Teachers College Record 87: 374-92.

Weiler, Kathleen. 1991. "Freire and a Feminist Pedagogy of Difference." Harvard Educational Review 61: 449-74.

Westkott, Marcia. 1979. "Feminist Criticism of the Social Sciences." Harvard Educational Review 49: 422-30.